

Sermon: - 22nd May 2016

God is Love



A little girl was scribbling furiously at a table. Her mother, intrigued by the girl's concentration, asked "what are you doing?" The little girl said "I'm drawing a picture of God". "But no-one knows what God looks like", said her mother. The little girl replied, "Well, they will when I'm finished!"

If only it were that simple. Today is Trinity Sunday. In a recent poll amongst ministers this was voted one of the most unpopular Sundays in the year. It's a Sunday when many ministers are tempted to call in sick. The reason it's so unpopular is that it is so difficult to preach about, because it is so difficult to explain. Although there is a sense in which it is actually very simple too. God is one God, but is also three persons. It is a mystery. We cannot understand it. And it is right that we cannot understand it, because we are human, mortal, finite, limited, and God is transcendent, immortal, infinite, and far beyond our understanding. His thoughts are not our thoughts, neither are his ways our ways. So it is actually very simple ... it is a mystery, and we cannot understand it.

But on the other hand, the fact that we cannot understand it does not stop us from trying, and that is right too. It's important to have some explanation for this rather strange doctrine that God is both one and three. This is the doctrine that leads Muslims to think that we are blasphemers because we worship Jesus, and Jews, and others, to think that we worship many Gods because we have a Trinity. The truth is that we do not blaspheme when we worship Jesus because he IS God, and we do not have more than one God because our God is three in one! Simples! Or is it? How do we understand this?

One of the difficulties in understanding this doctrine is that it is nowhere explicitly stated in Scripture. That may be surprising to you but scripture contains neither the word Trinity, nor an expressly formulated doctrine of the Trinity. Rather we might say it "bears witness to" the activity of a God who can only be understood as a Trinity. Sayings of Jesus such as "I and the Father are one" may lead us to believe that the doctrine of the Trinity is clearly outlined in scripture. The facts are somewhat different, so I thought we would take a very brief trip into early church history.

As we know, Christianity was born within Judaism. The Jewish God (our God) is the only God and Christians worshipped the Jewish God. The leaders of the early church, therefore, were alarmed when they discovered that young Christians were praying, not just through Jesus, that is, in the name of Jesus, but to Jesus, putting Jesus on a par with God. Was this blasphemy? The early Fathers went back to the scriptures and scrutinised them, discovering that much of the language that Jesus used supported the idea that he was equal with God and one with God and what's more, he spoke of the Holy Spirit, who proceeded from God. For example, Matthew 28:19 which commands us to baptise "in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit", and so the doctrine of the Trinity was born, One God in Three Persons, Father Son and Holy Spirit, the Godhead.

That's how it began, but how do we understand it. How can one God be three persons? They say that a picture paints a thousand words, so, although we do not have the little girl's finished portrait to tell us what God is like, still perhaps we can understand it better if we turn to art for assistance.

This 15th century Icon by Andrei Rublev, called 'The Holy Trinity' is based on the story in Genesis 18 where Abraham is visited by three strangers. Abraham and his wife Sarah offer them hospitality, and they tell Abraham that Sarah will soon give birth to a son. In exploring the mystery of the Trinity perhaps the insight of the artist can help us. This image is full of symbolism; it's designed to take the viewer into the Mystery of the Trinity, so let's try and unpack some of that symbolism to see if it sheds light on this problem.

Firstly, the three faces are identical and I think this is fundamental in helping us to understand the nature of the Trinity. In one sense there is no division between Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Secondly, all the figures wear a blue garment which is the colour of the heavens, signifying divinity, but each also wears something that speaks of their own specific identity. And so

we see the figure on the right representing the Spirit; the blue robe speaks of divinity and the green robe represents new life.

The Spirit inclines towards the centre, drawing our gaze to the central figure representing Christ. This figure also wears the blue of divinity but also a brown garment representing the earth and the humanity of Christ. The gold stripe on the shoulder signals the kingship of Christ.

The Christ figure in turn inclines towards the figure on the left.

This is a figure at rest within itself. In this case the blue garment of divinity is almost hidden by a shimmering robe. This is the Father; the one who is Creator and who cannot be seen by his human creatures. Both hands clasp a staff signifying that all authority in heaven and on earth belongs to the Father.

The other significant thing about this painting is its composition. The three figures incline towards one another, knees angled to the centre. This is a symbol of deep unity and oneness. A symbol of the deep love that unites all three members of the Trinity in one. This picture illustrates a perfect relationship of love.

I think one way to understand the Trinity is to appreciate that this perfect love relationship is actually taking place constantly within God. God exists as a love relationship. God is love in action: the fullness of love in action. God is a community of love so closely bound together that the three are one. And so Jesus can say, I and the father are one. He who has seen the Father has seen me, and so on.

But we also see that there is a space between the two figures nearest us. The wonderful thing, the miracle, I think, is that here is the gap where we are invited to take our place. Here there is room for us to be part of this fellowship of divine love; here we are offered to share in the very communion of those we call Father, Son and Holy Spirit; here we are drawn in to participate in the very worship of heaven.

God (Father, Son and Spirit) exists in perfect love relationship, but it is not a closed relationship. Without any disintegration of God, God became human, walking among us, and invited us into that love relationship which eternally exists between Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Jesus didn't come to suggest that we try to be loving, or to command us to act lovingly, or to condemn our lack of love. Jesus came as one who lives within the permanent experience of total love, to invite us to come into the experience of that love.

This is our God, a God who has in Christ (God become human) made it possible for us to enter into that all-embracing love relationship... as we respond and believe, and as the Holy Spirit catches us up into the eternal love of God. And so whenever we gather for worship, whether it is in a great, soaring cathedral or in our modest little building in Campsie, it is as if the roof is lifted off and we are raised to share in this great heavenly communion. God is in relationship within himself and God (Father Son and Holy Spirit) is in relationship with us.

For through believing in Jesus we are able to get caught up into this amazing relationship of love... caught up into the Trinity, and as we are gathered into that loving relationship we are transformed!! This transformation can only be described in the terms Jesus used to Nicodemus ... being "Born again"! We hear much today of "born again Christians" but in a sense that is a meaningless phrase. If you are a Christian you are Born Again, if you love the Lord Jesus Christ you are in him, part of this trinity of love and you are Born Again. If you believe, and are part of this church family then you are "born again". You cannot avoid it; it is a fact of life – spiritual life!

And in this love relationship, this born again relationship, with Father Son and Spirit, we are transformed (and continually being transformed!) so that we might be - with God - the means of transformation that he seeks to bring for creation, for the world, for all people...

And isn't that an amazing thought to take into the week with us. Whatever we do, wherever we are, at work, at home, at play, whether we teach or we tend, whether we care or we clean, whether we build or we bake, we do everything from within that relationship of love that is God in Trinity. God's love is in us, but we are also in God's love. As the apostle John tells us, No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us.

In the end of the day what the doctrine of the Trinity reveals is this ... God is a passionate Lover, and passionately loves us. God created us in order that he might love us and we might love him.

"God loved the world so much that he gave his only Son so that everyone who believes in him may not die but have eternal life." Let's live, conscious that we live in that all-encompassing love!